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## Rebels and Biopolitics: Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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### Abstract

Biopolitics—the strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed and regulated under regimes of authority—is ordinary currency in society, and ruling political systems exercise surveillance, incarceration and killings to a great extent in this regard. Michel Foucault's work on the regulation of human beings through the production of power serves as an initial medium of investigation into biopolitics. Yet, Giorgio Agamben probes the covert and overt presence of biopolitical violence in society, particularly through his concepts of state of exception and bare life. The Indian playwright Mahasweta Devi's Anglophone play-text *Mother of 1084* (1973) enables scholars to participate in a critical forum on biopolitical praxis, because of its pervasive and explicit representation of state violence and rebels. Nonetheless, the play-text is often renowned for its reference to feminist ideology and mother-son relationship. Existing scholarship has overlooked the manifestation of torture and dead bodies on-stage represented in it. The play is also on the periphery of the mainstream literary criticism. By engaging with a textual portrayal of the play through Foucauldian and Agambenian critical lenses, this article interrogates the ways in which biopolitics coerces populations within the contemporary socio-political milieu. The analysis implies a potential to understand the biopolitical logic more meaningfully, and to be resistant to its stratagems of coercion. It adds to the existing body of literature on biopolitics by creating a specific account of life-politics as characterised in postcolonial theatre, provides a supplemental standpoint to debates

on biopolitical subjugation and specifically contributes to current discussions of the play.

**Key words:** Bare life; State of exception; Agamben; Foucault; Naxalites; India

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### INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault, in his lectures in the 1990s, conceptualises biopolitics as an extension of the power of the state over both physical and political bodies of populations; this extends the definition given in the Oxford English Dictionary—"the interaction between politics and biology; specifically politically motivated intervention in the growth or development of a population". As Foucault expounds, human being is regulated, not only as an individual body, but as populations, using overall devices. It implies the ways human beings exist in society, not only as legally recognised citizens of a state, but as biological entities under the coercion of politics. Embedded in Foucault's concept, but moved beyond it, Giorgio Agamben's work is more attuned to the context of the twentieth century biopolitics—"modern biopolitics: the politics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century" (1998, p.119). Agamben's conceptualisation on modern biopolitics focuses on "bare life"—a status in which the biological life of human beings becomes subject to political decisions and objectification, and explores how "bare life" is subjected to a "status of exception"—a condition which "constitutes rather a kenomatic state, an emptiness of law" (2005, p.6). Implicitly, modern biopolitics entails the employment of diverse stratagems, culminating in a cessation of law, in subjugating and

regulating populations. Rooted in Foucault's biopolitical lenses, yet focussing on Agamben's conceptualisation of modern biopolitics, this article explores representations of the regulation of bodies through diverse corporeal and non-corporeal means; the Indian playwright Mahasweta Devi's Anglophone play-text *Mother of 1084*—its first English translation appeared in 1997 and in the original Bengali language in 1973 (Bandyopadhyay, 2011)—is read as an aesthetic representation of modern biopolitics, by focusing on one female character in it, Nandini, a political prisoner on parole. The aim is to create a critical space to understand the biopolitical logic more meaningfully, and to be resistant to its strategies of coercion—to reflect meaningfully on the praxis of violence in contemporary society.

## 1. MODERN BIOPOLITICS: BARE LIFE, MUSELMANN AND STATE OF EXCEPTION

"Bare life" explains "a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion" (Agamben, 1998, p.105). It refers to a threshold between the human and the inhuman in which it is impossible to separate one from the other. Agamben explains this status further through the obscure political status of the individual identified as *homo sacer* (sacred man), "*who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (1998, p.8), that is supposed to have existed in ancient Rome. This figure in Roman law is a banned person, who may be killed by anybody but is not sacrificed in religious contexts: hence it is a "double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed" (Agamben, 1998, p.82). Similarly, for Agamben, the killing of "bare life" is not considered a homicide because it is sacred in a negative manner and the process is under the coercion of political sovereignty.

When biological life and political power are inseparable, as Agamben contends, a corporeal space is created. In this regard, Agamben's suggestion is, for instance, that political prisoners of the twentieth century are placed outside the rule of penal and prison law, in "camps", as opposed to just incarcerated in prisons. Agamben describes that the camp is:

The most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation. This is why the camp is the very paradigm of political space at the point of which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen. (1998, p.171)

"[W]hile prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is [...] martial law and the state of siege" (Agamben, 1998, p.20). In order to understand "the state of siege", his concept of

*Muselmann* is helpful, as it embodies absolute coercion over human beings through imprisonment. *Muselmann* is a derogatory term used to refer to the captives of the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. These captives suffered from starvation and exhaustion, becoming resigned to their death, making them unresponsive to their environment; Agamben argues that the *Muselmann* "marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman" (2002, p.55). Such prisoners are living-dead human beings, a status which cannot be comprehended as either dead or alive, but "bare life".

This parallels Agamben's example of a contemporary state of exception. In the context of the wars in Afghanistan, he refers to "[t]he USA Patriot Act issued by the U.S. Senate on October 26, 2001" which "erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being" (2005, p.3). Accordingly, captured members of the Taliban become "[n]either prisoners nor persons accused, but simply 'detainees', they are the object of a pure *de facto* rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight" (2005, pp.3-4). This article exposes "bare life", *muselmann* and state of exception through *Mother of 1084* and its backdrop of Naxalite uprisings.

## 2. THE NAXALITE UPRISINGS

After gaining independence in 1947, the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964) gave his independence-day speech—"Tryst with Destiny". His emphasis was:

[t]o bring freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman.<sup>1</sup>

What emerges from Nehru's communiqué is his intention to build the nation, ensuring justice to all, irrespective of class, caste or creed. Like many other former colonies, India is an "artificial [creation]" of "European powers" and in the successor states there was no "convergence" between "the state and the nation": This creates a need for the "nation-building process" (Das, 2001, p.5). Nonetheless, "despite certain obvious outward changes in forms of governance or employment of new political hyperbolas, the Indian Government under Jawaharlal Nehru represented in many respects a continuation of British attitudes both in form and substance" (Das, 2001, p.7), specifically through the states' deployment of the police and military.

<sup>1</sup> From "Nehru's Speech to the Nation on the Independence Day".

Consequently, people's revolts against the ruling system which claimed justice for all became apparent since the early postcolonial era. The emergence of Naxalites is a case in point.

The Naxalites are a militant communist group operating mainly in many impoverished parts of southern and eastern India with the highest rates of illiteracy, poverty and over-population in India. The group, supportive of Maoist Political Ideology (Dixit, 2010; Sinha & Vaishnav 2012), initiated its movement in West Bengal in the late 1960s—the first phase of Naxalite movement—in a village named Naxal (hence “Naxalite”). “[I]n spite of the United Front being in power”,<sup>2</sup> land reforms in Naxalbari were “still ineffectual” in the 1960s, and operated by “class and caste tensions” (Dixit, 2010, pp.24-25). Dixit writes, “this polarized the agrarian classes and created an environment of confrontation” resulting in the birth of Naxalbari uprisings (2010, p.25). The origin can also be “traced to the split in 1967 of the Communist Party of India Marxist, leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist” (Mishra, 2011, p.v). Referring to the Naxalite upsurge, Dixit states that the causes of the movement are “in essence, socioeconomic” and political because the “spirit of the law remained confined to paper and the people were left to languish” (2010, p.23), although there were policies to address agrarian issues.

Yet, the Indian Government did not analyse the causes of the unrest, rather they considered it a “law and order problem” (Dixit, 2010, p.22). They imposed rules and regulations “to empower themselves to combat Naxals” when the West Bengal Government acted ‘to arm itself to repress the uprising’ (Ibid.).<sup>3</sup> This Naxalbari resistance resulted in many forceful engagements (Kennedy & Purushotham, 2012). In addressing the revolution—the Naxalites’ antagonism towards the state—the Indian Government attempted “to negotiate with the insurgents”, yet commenced “police operations” to defeat the insurgency (Kennedy & Purushotham, 2012, p.846). As Dixit notes, “in spite of [*sic*] the government’s muscle power and legal teeth the Naxal movement has continued to spread its base because the rural poor and oppressed identify with its ideology” (2010, p.23).

What is significant to *Mother of 1084* is the second phase of the Naxalite unrest which focuses on the urban context and Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi’s repressive biopolitical stratagem in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> During the last four decades, Naxalites have attempted to create a “revolutionary transformation in the benighted economic and social conditions of the Indian poor” (Iyer, 2007,

p.194). This led the ex-Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, to state in 2008 that “Naxalism is the greatest threat to our internal security” (Dixit, 2010, p.22), and the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to make his appeal to the youth “to get the guns off your shoulders and get a plough in its place” (2014).<sup>5</sup> *Mother of 1084* dramatically presents the relevance of this threat and the appeal ahead of time.

### 3. MOTHER OF 1084

*Mother of 1084* epitomises the Indian Government’s reaction to the resistance that emerged during the Naxalite insurgency in the 1970s in West Bengal and offers the most explicit representation of the state’s violence as it *stages* death, torture and violence. In contrast to the dramaturgical and conceptual significance of brutality on-stage as a direct reference to the state’s biopolitical apparatus, *Mother of 1084* is often renowned for its reference to feminist ideology in a patriarchal society and to the process of a mother’s identification of her son and his political commitment. Recent historiography has turned its attention to women’s roles in Naxalbari. Existing scholarship has overlooked the manifestation of torture and dead bodies on-stage.

Set against the climatic period of the suppression of the urban Naxalites, the play focuses on the young Naxalites—the youth from disadvantaged populations residing in urban areas, as well as educated youths from the middle or upper middle-class, who joined the movement to speak for the oppressed. Even though the events in *Mother of 1084* covers a two year span, everything happens *de facto* within a single day—the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1972—and follows the experiences of a middle-class woman, Sujata Chatterjee. This is the day of the engagement party of the youngest daughter in the Chatterjee family. Brati, the younger son of the family, is a college student who was killed because of his connections with the Naxalite group: “1084” is the identity given to Brati’s body by the police and 17<sup>th</sup> January is the anniversary of Brati’s death, as well as his birthday. The story exposes Sujata’s journey to the world of the Naxalites and Brati’s involvement in it through Nandini—Brati’s girlfriend—and Somu’s mother’s narrativisation (Somu, a member of Brati’s group, but from the socio-economically disenfranchised class, is among the deceased.). This article focuses on Nandini as she is one of the surviving revolutionaries of the Naxalite movement and offers first-hand experiences of the repression: Nandini provides seamless transparency to the Naxalite ideology and the state’s repression.

<sup>2</sup> The United Front is the state government in West Bengal formed in 1967.

<sup>3</sup> This is according to Prevention of Violent Activities, Act 1970 (Dixit, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi was the Prime Minister of India from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 until her assassination in 1984.

<sup>5</sup> This appears in the article, “Prime Minister Narendra Modi urges youth to give up violence” (2014).

#### 4. NANDINI: A 'LEGALLY UNNAMABLE AND UNCLASSIFIABLE BEING'

Nandini's narrativisation with Sujata at a public restaurant, which discloses Naxalites' aims and causes and the present circumstances of the movement, denotes the symbolic publicity given to the Naxalite movement in the play. First, echoing Gandhi's Government which offered ransom to the non-loyal members to help security forces to identify Naxalites (Kennedy & Purushotham, 2012), Nandini says that "[m]oney, jobs and power didn't mean a thing to us. But these were the temptations that seduced those who had joined us only to betray us" (2011, p.25). It provides testimony to Naxalite subjectivity to the state's programme of betrayal: Implicit here is the state's strategic targeting of this weakness of human loyalties.

Nandini also considers media betrayal: "[t]he worst reactionists make avowals for their sympathy" but they "spoil" Naxalites' "image in the public eye" (2011, p.27). The misrepresentation exercised by the media, which provides Naxalites no opportunity to explain their grievances and the reasons behind the development of the movement, is reversed as she affirms that the Naxalites' cause is not a motive born out of hatred of the state, but their love of the nation. Nandini also voices politicians' ignorance to Naxalites but attention to their own interests to comply with the central Government in India. As a consequence of the state's betrayal, Naxalites become incarcerated: "[t]he prison walls rise higher, new watch towers shoot up, there are so many young men still in the prisons" (Ibid.).

Her behavior during her revelation demonstrates that she is ready to expose something secretive, something which might disturb the authoritative state. Thus, she is under self-observation. This self-incarceration in a public place signifies the torture a living Naxalite may have to undergo in the 1970s. While recalling Foucault's notions on self-surveillance—"he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it [...] becomes the principle of his own subjection" (1995, pp.202-203)—Nandini's consciousness of her position under the state's surveillance results in her self-scrutiny: She becomes complicit in her subjugation. Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the white person's surveillance of the black colonised interpellates the black subject as inferior and other: Successively, the black person "proceeds from humiliating insecurity through strongly voiced self-accusation to despair" (2008, p.43) by dint of a self-regulating surveillance process. Nandini too is subject to self-surveillance: this is neither to circumvent the colonisers' or the internal rulers' gaze of denunciation, nor to shun her Naxalite identity, but in an attempt to escape from the state's biopolitical surveillance. Although she experiences her own debilitating version of Fanonian self-gaze, she does so to preserve her agency as a Naxalite.

The action at the restaurant is shifted to a flashback demonstrating an encounter between Nandini and Pal, the police officer, in a cross-inquiry in the police-station. "*Nandini fidgets from time to time, trying helplessly to rise to her feet, making it obvious in the process that her hands and her feet are tied to the chair*" (2011, p.30). The spectacle of tying Nandini to a chair alludes to tethering animals and the image of Nandini as an untamable beast shows how detainees are brutalised and dehumanised. Nandini's position is a significant case in point of a cessation of law, for Nandini endures police violence prior to any juridical edict. In addition to corporeal torture, Pal ignores her strong objection to witness the pictures of dead bodies, including Brati's corpse: while turning "*her head away violently, Saroj Pal insistently holds the picture up before her eyes*" (2011, p.33). Pal also "*bends closer to her, lights a cigarette, presses the lighted cigarette to Nandini's cheek. She screams [...] He puffs at the cigarette, and then presses it again to Nandini's cheek. Nandini screams. The questions and the pattern continue*" (2011, p.33). Nandini's 'right eye is "blind from the gleam of the thousand-watt lamps"—is 'out on parole. For medical treatment" (2011, p.35). This provides testimony on-stage to the extent of the state's torture while metaphorically representing the state's exertion to crush the Naxalite movement because when applied indiscriminately torture is used as a tool of repression and deterrence against rebellion and Naxalite empowerment.

Legal systems usually ensure the accused's basic rights such as the right to trial and to call witnesses in their defense: A defendant is also protected from inhumane treatment or punishment before conviction. Yet, Nandini discloses that thousands of young men and women are arrested and deprived of their basic human rights. Before formal convictions are passed, they are imprisoned: they are neither detainees nor prisoners according to regular legal systems. Similarly, Naxalite members rotting "without trial" in prisons are "unclassifiable being[s]", subject to the state's cruelty. They are subjected to arbitrary detention; then interrogators torture them—both psychologically and physically.

#### 5. SYMBOLICAL CONFRONTATION

In the course of her narrativisation, Nandini gains authority; her voice denotes objection and power over Pal as explicit through her refusal to speak, despite his forceful efforts to extract information from her. Her expressions during Pal's questioning such as "I don't know them", "I won't say a thing" and "I don't believe you" (2011, pp.32-33) display Nandini as an active subject, not as a passive victim. Her hostility objecting Pal is intensified through her scream. Although the scream is caused by physical pain, it reinforces the objection to Pal: Her voice enhances the scene, insinuating the authority she possesses over Pal.



Her second scream on-stage also functions as a metaphor of resistance: In response to Sujata's comment—"it's all quiet now" (2011, p.34)—Nandini "screams" (2011, p.34) loudly, startling the audience, and with this her authoritative power of voice reaches a peak.

No. No. No. No! It was never quiet, nothing's quiet. Nothing's changed. Thousands of men to rot in the prisons without trial, they are denied the status of political, and yet you say it's all settled down again? Torture continues with greater sophistication and more secrecy, and yet you say it's all quiet? All quiet? What do you need to get it into your heads that nothing's quiet? (2011, p.34)

The play provides a space for Nandini to freely voice her accusation against the state; ironically—and most dramatically—this happens when she is being tortured or on bail. It is interesting to note here that fiction is used as a space to articulate alternative narratives of history, traumatic experience, and the voices of the voiceless. She poses a rhetorical question—"[how] can you be smug and complacent?" when Naxalites are brutalised (2011, p.35); and her rebelliousness and self-determination to grow "sharp like a dissectors' knife" (2011, p.35) enhance this. Implicit in Nandini's claim—"[s]ome day you'll learn that I've been arrested again" (2011, p.35)—is Naxalites' unbroken ideology and confrontation, in the wake of the states' brutality. This is a role-reversal of the state's power and an affirmation of marginal and suppressed voices against modern biopolitics.

## CONCLUSION

The play dramatises the illegal mechanism of internal politics of the country despite aspirations to build the nation through democracy and justice. Nandini's visibly tortured presence on-stage is a formidable spectacle and she speaks about her body being placed under the internal power of the police. Her experience epitomises the ways in which the country uses a form of biopolitics focused on the body of the insurgent, using verbal and physical harassment. The Naxalites' incarceration without judiciary decisions demonstrates lawlessness: It is an instance where constitutional rights are superseded and rejected by the state.

Agamben elucidates that "[i]n every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other" (2005, p.40). What is evinced through the Naxalites' experiences is how the prolonged state of exception dispossesses the Naxalites of their human rights, but exposes them to a status of threshold between human and inhuman—"bare life" and modern muselmann. This leads to problematise the rebels' actions on the one hand, and biopolitical stratagems burgeoning in the contemporary world on the other, and creates a critical space to reflect meaningfully on biopolitics and to seek a route to resistance.

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